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[Immigration Deadlock Revisited](#)

Fear of Voter Backlash Prompts GOP Senators to Consider House's Tougher Bill

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Republican Senate leaders are considering how to revive immigration legislation and cut a deal with the more hard-line House, a sign of increasing GOP concern that inaction on the emotionally charged issue could hurt the party with voters in November.

For months, House and Senate Republicans have steadfastly defended their respective positions. The House has insisted on tougher border and deportation provisions only. The Senate, allied with President Bush, has demanded that a crackdown be coupled with an overhaul of immigration laws, including a broader guest worker program and a pathway to legal status for the estimated 12 million people who live in the United States illegally.

House leaders appeared to be winning the standoff. They announced this month that they would hold field hearings on immigration throughout the summer, all but guaranteeing that a bill could not be completed until after the election.

But in recent days, senators and the White House have dropped hints that they are willing to move closer to the House's position -- perhaps by agreeing to a two-phase plan that would begin with construction of triple-layer walls, deployment of surveillance aircraft and other means of tightening the border with Mexico.

When those measures are fully funded and operational -- a process that could take as much as two years -- debate on some version of the Senate's broader proposals would begin.

Judiciary Committee Chairman Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), a leader of the Senate's immigration efforts, told CNN this week: "I think everybody agrees that securing the border is number one. . . . We're prepared to commit to secure borders. We have got to have a timetable on the rest of it, as well."

The House yesterday announced that its first two field hearings on immigration will be held on Wednesday in San Diego and on Friday in Laredo, Tex. Specter, meanwhile, scheduled his own field hearing, in Philadelphia, on Wednesday. He invited Edward M. Kennedy (Mass.), one of the chief Democratic sponsors of the Senate approach, to join him.

House GOP leaders interpreted the Senate overtures as vindication of their tougher stance.

"I've really been rather encouraged about what's happened over the last several days with regard to the issue of immigration," said House Majority Leader John A. Boehner (R-Ohio).

Also this week, Rep. Mike Pence (R-Ind.) met with Bush and Vice President Cheney to discuss his proposal for a guest worker program that would roll out only after the government certifies that the border is secure. "The president listened intently," Pence told reporters. "He told me that he was intrigued with my proposal."

Democrats are increasingly confident that immigration will be a winning issue for them at the polls, as an illustration of their argument that Bush and the GOP congressional leadership are incompetent.

Sen. Charles E. Schumer (N.Y.) and Rep. Rahm Emanuel (Ill.), the chairmen of the Senate and House Democratic campaign committees, respectively, said Democratic challengers will launch a coordinated effort to blame the Republican leadership for creating the immigration problems that the GOP now confronts. "They're in the majority," Emanuel said. "When you fail, that failure is wrapped around your neck."

For instance, according to statistics cited by the Democrats, the number of border apprehensions has declined by 31 percent since Bush took office, to an average of 1.05 million cases per year between 2001 and 2004, from an average 1.52 million cases per year during the late 1990s. The number of illegal immigrants caught each year inside the United States also declined by about a third, to about 25,901

on average between 2001 and 2004, from an annual average of 40,193 in the late 1990s.

"That is a joke," Schumer said. "It's also a political billboard."